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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0188
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0150
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RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0150
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 000279

SIPDIS SIPDIS
DEPT FOR SCA AND DRL
USOSCE FOR ELIZABETH KAUFMAN AND MICHAEL STEVENS
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

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TAGS: PHUM KPAQ OSCE PGOV PREL UZ

SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: UPDATE ON THREE CASES INVOLVING JOURNALISTS

REF: 08 TASHKENT 1163; TASHKENT 217

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CLASSIFIED BY: Richard Fitzmaurice, Poloff; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (U) Summary: This cable provides updates on the cases of three journalists who have recently been imprisoned or charged with various crimes: Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov, a journalist from Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic who was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on politically-motivated drug charges in October 2008 (ref A); Khushodbek Usmanov, a journalist at a state-controlled newspaper in Andijon province who was charged with hooliganism and defamation in January; and Dilmurod Sayyidov, an Embassy contact and journalist who was accused of extortion by Samarkand province officials in February (ref B). We recommend these cases be raised at the upcoming OSCE session devoted to media freedom. End summary.

OZODLIK MISREPORTS SUPREME COURT DECISION ON ABDURAKHMANOV

¶2. (C) On March 3, Radio Free Europe's Uzbek language website Ozodlik.org erroneously reported that the Uzbek Supreme Court had decided to send back Abdurakhmanov's case to a court in Karakalpakstan for reconsideration after uncovering unspecified shortcomings in the original criminal case against him. On March 10, Abdurakhmanov's brother Bakhrom told Embassy Press Assistant that he was misunderstood by the Ozodlik reporter, explaining that the Supreme Court had only requested additional documentation from Karakalpak authorities. He noted that the Supreme Court was still considering his brother's case and had not yet made any decision. He also observed that the inaccurate Ozodlik report had been subsequently picked up by several other independent media outlets.

ANDIJON-BASED JOURNALIST REPORTEDLY BEATEN

¶3. (C) On March 5, the independent Harakat.net website reported that journalist Khushodbek Usmanov was beaten with blunt objects while being held at a pre-trial detention facility in Andijon province. Harakat's editor (and Ezgulik human rights group deputy director) Abdurakhmon Tashanov told Embassy Press Assistant on March 10 that Usmanov's wife, Nasiba Abdullaeva, reported the incident to him, which he believed was credible. Tashanov is currently monitoring Usmanov's trial at a criminal court in the town of Asaka in Andijon province, which is expected to conclude soon. The Prosecutor reportedly requested a sentence for Usmanov of six months for hooliganism and defamation, though Tashanov expected that Usmanov would be given a suspended sentence because of his age (Usmanov is 64 years old).

¶4. (C) Tashanov reported to Embassy Press Assistant that Usmanov was a journalist at a small state-controlled newspaper in Asaka. He observed that his writing was not particularly noteworthy and focused mostly on business. Tashanov added that he was "100 percent" sure that Usmanov was not targeted because of his journalism, but rather because he had sent several inflammatory letters to local police in Asaka shortly before his arrest. He

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also shared his view that Usmanov was "mentally unbalanced."

SAYYIDOV FORMALLY CHARGED, AWAITING TRIAL

¶5. (C) On March 13, poloff met with the wife and mother of Dilmurod Sayyidov, who was arrested in Tashkent on February 20 and was formally charged by Samarkand authorities on February 25 with extortion (Criminal Code Article 165), which carries a possible sentence of between 10 and 15 years' imprisonment (ref B). Sayyidov is currently being held at a pre-trial detention facility in the town of Kattakurghan in Samarkand province. Sayyidov's lawyers, Rukhuddin Komilov and Hasan Makbubov, have been allowed to visit him a total of four times since his arrest and reported that he does not appear to have been mistreated. Authorities are still pursuing their criminal investigation into Sayyidov and it is unclear when a trial may commence.

¶6. (C) Sayyidov's wife argued that the extortion charge was fabricated by local authorities who were upset with his advocacy in support of farmers from Samarkand's Jamboy district embroiled in a dispute with local officials. These officials included collective farm head Asliddin Orambaev, who was reportedly cheating farmers out of fuel subsidies, and Orambaev's sister, another local official who was illegally selling land at the farmers' expense. After their complaints fell on deaf ears, the farmers reportedly turned to Sayyidov, who wrote several articles on their plight (we have not seen copies of the articles). Approximately two weeks before his arrest, Sayyidov was contacted by one of the farmers' daughters, Marguba Juraeva, who said she wanted to arrange a meeting with Orambaev. Sayyidov initially refused to meet with him, but after being hounded incessantly by Juraeva for several days, he finally agreed to meet with Juraeva and Orambaev at a restaurant in Samarkand on February 18. At the meeting, Orambaev reportedly asked that Sayyidov cease his advocacy on behalf of the

farmers. On February 22, Juraeva was allegedly arrested by police in Samarkand while in possession of 10,000 dollars. She claimed that Sayyidov had demanded the money from Orambaev during the meeting at the restaurant in return for ceasing his advocacy on behalf of the farmers. Sayyidov's wife reported that Juraeva later admitted fabricating the story in the presence of Sayyidov's lawyer. She also reported that three officials from the Samarkand General Prosecutor's Office produced a warrant to search their home in Tashkent on February 24, but found nothing incriminating.

¶7. (C) According to his wife, Sayyidov has suffered from a non-reactive form of tuberculosis for the past seven years and was receiving treatment, including injections and tablets, at a private clinic in Tashkent every three months. He also occasionally would spit up blood and was using cream to reduce swelling in his arms and legs. As far as his wife knew, Sayyidov has not been receiving any medical care since his arrest. Authorities have refused to let relatives see him, although they agreed to deliver to him care packages of food and warm clothing. Both his wife and the independent Ezgulik human rights group have submitted appeals requesting that Sayyidov be released from pre-trial detention on health grounds until his trial.

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COMMENT

¶8. (C) Of the three journalists, only Abdurakhmanov appears to have been targeted by provincial authorities because of his writing, while Usmanov and Sayyidov seem to have run afoul of local authorities for other reasons. We will continue to follow their cases closely. One potential opportunity for the United States government to advocate on behalf of these individuals is to raise their cases with the Uzbek government in conjunction with a presentation that OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti plans to give to the OSCE Permanent Council in early April (Haraszti delivered a letter to Uzbek OSCE Charge Yusupov on March 4 raising concern regarding the Usmanov and Sayyidov cases).

NORLAND